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Illusory Imagination versus Nihilistic Reason

A Historical-Philosophical Case Study of the Role of Imagination in Religion

We play with the imagination frequently and gladly, but (as fantasy) the imagination just as often plays with us, sometimes very *inconveniently*.¹

With the progress of reason, many feelings constantly get lost, and many moving associations of the imagination become weaker.²

1 Introduction

The quotations of Kant and Hegel, given above, serve as a motto of this paper. They immediately lead us to the heart of the problematic which we are dealing with during this conference. If all three classic transcendentals, viz. the true, the good, and the beautiful, reveal something of God's transcendent reality, then art and imagination belong to the core of religion. Many philosophers and theologians have pointed to the fact that prayers, rituals, and religious works of art move the religious heart of man more profoundly, and bring him closer to God than all proofs of his existence together. Pascal already warned us against a naive trust in reason, especially with regard to matters that affect humans existentially: 'Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas.'³ From this perspective, the weakening of religious imagination and the disappearing of its products from the churches and the collective memory of Christians are a major impoverishment of religion. But on the other hand, the use of imagination in religion also introduces the risk of illusion or superstition. Doesn't imagination inevitably lead to a wishful thinking about God, to a projection of our own expectations and desires on an imaginary transcendent being? Let me give an example: since for me, being a philosopher is not only a job like another, but involves also an aspect of vocation, I venerate Saint Thomas Aquinas, the patron saint of philosophers. I even have a picture of him in my study in order to make my veneration more concrete. Looking at this picture helps me to keep my thinking concentrated on what philosophy essentially is all about: the rational quest for truth, combined with the trust that this quest, although real truth lies beyond the capacities of human reason, is yet not in vain. I even can imagine that my veneration for Thomas gives me the

1. I. Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, 2. Auflage (1800), 80. In the following, I refer to this work in the main text as (*Anthropologie*. . .).

2. G.W.F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke, Band 1, Frühe Schriften*, Hamburg, 1989, 124. In the following, I refer to this edition in the main text as (GW 1. . .).

3. B. Pascal, *Pensées*, 277.

strength of mind, necessary to write a good paper. Although I am not able to present many rational arguments for the effectiveness of my veneration of saints for my thinking, I am confident that it works, or at least helps a little bit. But on the other hand, imagination can also play an inconvenient game with me; it can generate all kinds of religious illusion and superstition in me, both as a reasonable and as a moral being. If, in spite of all my pleas to Saint Thomas for understanding and insight, my paper would turn out to be a complete disaster, it yet would be an act of superstition to remove Thomas's picture from my study or put it in the corner for punishment. So, the relevance of the imagination for religion cannot be confirmed just like that, but asks for further examination. What can be the relevance of religious imagination for faith and to which problems does a naive trust in imagination give cause?

In relation to the foregoing, another question immediately arises, viz. regarding the rational status of philosophy of religion. If it really is so that imagination belongs to the essence of religion, what does this mean for the kind of rationality of philosophy of religion? Can reason still hold on to its 'enlightened' conviction that it should distance itself as much as possible from religious imagination, since the latter is only a source of superstition? For many centuries, the only type of rational reflection on religion was an immanent one, i.e. a philosophical contemplation of religious truths within a theological framework. In this situation, philosophy could smoothly leave imagination to religious artists and their theological advisors. Philosophical rationality and religious imagination complemented each other very well, for they both were part of an all-embracing divine order. But in the course of modernity, this order falls apart, and a secular idea of rationality and truth emerges. This situation gives rise to the birth of philosophy of religion in the strict sense of the word. It is no longer the handmaid of theology, and does no longer content itself with its apologetic task. Moreover, it not only describes the phenomenon of religion philosophically, but also critically examines its rationality. In this context, philosophy of religion gets more and more difficulties with those elements in Christian religion, which are at odds with its (presumed) rational core. It wants to preserve religion from illusion and deceit. Miracles are the most obvious example of this danger, but by extension one can also think of other products of religious imagination. The well-known opposition between revealed and natural religion is the most striking illustration of this evolution. During the Enlightenment, natural religion and theology are proclaimed to be the critical standard of revealed religion. On the basis of this conviction, different conceptions of their mutual relationship are possible: some are convinced that revealed religion has become obsolete, while others consider it to be in accordance with natural religion and look upon it as a preparation for rational religion. In any case, enlightened philosophy perceives a clear opposition between the general acceptability and reasonableness of natural religion and the particularity and confusing multiplicity of revealed religions. In this situation, religious imagination is doomed to play a completely subordinate role, or even to disappear altogether out of sight of the philosophers of religion. The rationalization of religion inevitably seems to be at the expense of religious imagination. But as a result of this, one can

critically ask whether this rationalizing tendency has not in fact and in principle amounted to an impoverishing reduction of religion. Doesn't religious imagination bear in itself a unique truth, to which the enlightened understanding is blind? Even if one accepts it as inevitable that living religion is always richer than the understanding of it by reason, doesn't it nevertheless belong to the essence of philosophy to look for ways to think the truth that is present in religious imagination? These questions lead to other ones, which concern the rationality of philosophy of religion itself. If imagination belongs to the essence of religion, how can philosophy do justice to it? What kind of reason does philosophy of religion need to be able to think the truth of religious imagination? In sum, is an 'imagining rationality' conceivable and what does it mean?

The reference to the Enlightenment, made above, already offers an indication of the way, in which I want to limit somewhat the scope and complexity of my answers to the two leading questions. A complete historical survey of the relations between religion and imagination, as much as of its implications for the rationality of philosophy of religion, would largely exceed the framework of this paper. Therefore I want to limit myself to a historical-philosophical case study. More specifically, I want to examine the discussion between Kant and Hegel on the issue whether religion has to appeal not only to reason, but also to imagination. But a purely historical account of this discussion is of little relevance for philosophy of religion as a systematic philosophical discipline. Therefore, in the concluding paragraphs of each section and in the conclusion of this paper, I will draw some systematic conclusions with regard to the function of the imagination in religion. Furthermore, I want to analyze the systematic implications of these diverging historical answers. What kind of rationality should philosophy of religion develop in order to be capable of thinking religious imagination. With regard to Kant, I will focus on his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* and the *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. As far as Hegel is concerned, I will discuss an early fragment of his so-called *Tübingen Essay*, in which he explicitly pays attention to the importance of imagination (or fantasy) for religion.

2 Imagination as a source of illusion

In his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, which was published in 1798, Kant speaks about the faculty of imagination (the *facultas imaginandi*) as a capacity, which lies between sensibility and understanding. It is 'a faculty of perception without the presence of the object' (*Anthropologie*, 69). There are two different faculties of imagination, the productive and the reproductive one. The productive faculty offers an *original* representation of the object (i.e. without a preceding experience) in the human mind. An example: when an artist wants to make a sculpture, he first needs to represent its image in his mind. On the other hand, the examination of the reproductive faculty of imagination shows that its representation of an object is derived from previous empirical perceptions. The faculty of imagination recalls them to mind, as is the case when we remember something or somebody on the base of the laws of association. In both cases, these representations are produced voluntarily. When the faculty of imagination

produces images involuntarily, it is called fantasy.

Although the creative element plays a more prominent role in the productive faculty of imagination than in the reproductive one, yet the former is not entirely creative. As little as the reproductive faculty, the productive one ‘does not have the power to produce a sense impression which has *never* before occurred to our senses. One can always identify the material, which gave rise to that impression’ (*Anthropologie*, 69). Someone, who e.g. has never seen the color red before, can by no means produce a representation of red with his imagination. In religion, imagination is also present, as becomes clear in religious art. The faculty of imagination, with which we are dealing here, is obviously the productive one. For we cannot found our religious imaginations directly on sensory perception; nobody has ever seen God. Yet, neither in this case the imagination is entirely productive, since we can demonstrate from where it receives its material. Religious imagination can take its material directly from experiences of divine revelation. But usually it appeals to already existing imaginations, such as the Bible and other inspired texts. Thus, religious imagination is always embedded in a long tradition of given images. I will illustrate this by the example of the tradition of imagining the Holy Trinity in Christian art. One of the oldest examples is the image of the three angels visiting Abraham and Sara (a mosaic in the Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome from the 5th century, and of course the famous icon of Andrey Rublyov from the 15th century). But we can also think of the baptism of Christ in the river Jordan, with a hand coming from heaven, and a dove. Other traditional images of the Trinity are three crossing circles, or the image of God as an old man, bearing the crucified Christ, with a dove flying above them (the so-called chair of grace, painted by Albrecht Dürer in the 16th century). These examples show that religious imagination is never completely free, but is always bound by given material, viz. an iconographic tradition, which is based on images that have accepted as successful representations of the Trinity. So ‘however great an artist the imagination may be, even if it is a sorceress, it is still not creative, but must gather the material for its images from the senses’ (*Anthropologie*, 70). As a conclusion, one can say that the faculty of imagination is a combination of receptivity (the material of the imagination has to be given to the senses) and spontaneity (the way, in which the faculty of imagination creates a representation from the given material, is free).

Precisely because of its mediating function between sensibility and understanding, the productive faculty of imagination plays a crucial role in Kant’s *Critique of pure reason*. On the one hand, the faculty of imagination belongs to sensibility; it is the only faculty that can offer to the concepts of understanding a corresponding representation. Thus, thanks to (the schemes of) this productive imagination, the categories of understanding receive their meaning. On the other hand, the synthesis of the faculty of imagination is an expression of spontaneity, for it is capable to determine sensibility a priori. ‘Its synthesis of intuitions, conforming as it does to the *categories*, must be the transcendental synthesis of *imagination*. This synthesis is an action of the understanding on the sensibility,

and is its first application to the objects of our possible intuition.⁴ The faculty of imagination enables us to apply the unity and universality of the categories to the multiplicity and particularity of sensory representations. Therefore, without the faculty of imagination no knowledge at all possible, although we are only rarely aware of its action.

Although Kant considers imagination to be crucial for knowledge, he is overall opposed to man's free use of it. The faculty of imagination can become dangerous, since it can produce effects that are sometimes similar to hallucinations, aroused by drugs. In some situations even, the products of the faculty of imagination are nothing else than supposed inner perceptions or *fantasmatism*.⁵ In order to delineate the illusory effects of productive imagination as clearly as possible from its positive ones, he makes the following distinction: 'Originality of the imagination is called genius when it harmonizes with notions. If originality does not harmonize with notions, then it is called *fantasmatism*' (*Anthropologie*, 76). The notions, of which Kant speaks here, are in fact empirically based concepts. Thus, it is crucial for imagination to have a solid empirical foundation in order to prevent it from deteriorating into *fantasmatism*. If there is no empirical basis, imagination inevitably produces its *fantasmatic* effects only as a derivative of man's spontaneous, boundless expectations and desires.

What does the foregoing analysis teach us about the function of imagination in religion? Does it necessarily lead to *fantasmatism*, or does it also have a positive effect? The core of the problem is that, in religious matters, man by definition has no immediate sensory experience to keep his imagination under control and to preserve him from illusion. In order to clarify this important issue, Kant departs from an example of religious imagination, already given above, viz. the representation of the Trinity as an old man, a young man, and a dove. Because the three persons of the Trinity are reasonable beings, man can only imagine them by anthropomorphizing them, i.e. by imagining them as human beings (at least, as far as the Father and the Son are concerned). However, it is evident that these anthropomorphic images are by no means similar to the real, transcendent object (the Trinity) they represent. The Trinity, which we imagine as three persons, is completely different from our experience of human persons. The question is whether in religion a correct use of the imagination is possible. Can we conceive a kind of religious imagination that takes into account the essential dissimilarity between the transcendent essence of the Trinity and its image? Or does it inevitably destroy this dissimilarity, thus ending in *fantasmatism*? The only possibility to escape the danger of illusion is by keeping in mind that the image of the Trinity as human beings is *symbolic* one. A symbol is indeed a product of imagination, yet it can never substitute the object it symbolizes. Its symbolic quality precisely depends on the distance it maintains between the symbolic image (the old man, the young man and the dove) and the transcendent reality it represents (the Trinity). 'We have to anthropomorphize if we want to provide our notions of rational

4. I. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 152.

5. It is almost impossible to find a correct translation of the German word *Schwärmerei*. In English translations of Kant's work, it is translated both as 'fanaticism' and 'enthusiasm'. I prefer the neologism *fantasmatism*, in order to stress its emotionally exaggerated and illusory character.

beings with illustration. It is, however, unfortunate and childish if, as a consequence, the symbolic representation becomes the notion for the object as such' (*Anthropologie*, 76, Note). If man does not observe the distinction between the symbolic representation and what is being symbolized, he takes his imaginations for reality and falls back into illusions. Philosophy is the critical authority to examine the symbolic character of every religious imagination. It should discourage the bad tendency to substitute the transcendent religious object by products of the imagination. In sum, its task is to preserve religious humans from wishful thinking, as an *intellectual* form of illusion.

What role does imagination play in Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*? How does he judge in this work the connection between imagination and religion? What strikes one most, is that his attitude towards imagination in this text is much more negative than in his *Anthropology*, which was published five years later. In the first place, this is so because in his pragmatic *Anthropology*, Kant discusses the faculty of imagination in a 'pragmatic' framework, i.e. 'the investigation of what man makes, can, or should make of himself as a freely acting being' (*Anthropologie*, IV). In the *Religion*, on the other hand, he is specifically occupied with the function of imagination in moral religion. But there is also another reason for this difference, which is more important for us. In his *Anthropology*, Kant situates the illusions, to which the faculty of imagination can give rise, mainly on an intellectual level, whereas in the *Religion*, he focuses all his attention on the moral illusions, which our imagination produces. Because of their dramatic consequences for man as a moral being, Kant judges these moral illusions much more severely than the intellectual ones.

As is common knowledge, he considers religion as subordinate to morality: '*Religion* is (subjectively considered) the recognition of all our duties as divine commandments.'⁶ Therefore, the content of the only true religion can only consist in those practical principles, which are essential to man's moral actions. This means that in moral, merely reasonable religion, an appeal to sensibility and imagination, in sum for anthropomorphic representations, as possible approaches to God, is out of question. Also with regard to the requirements, which the true, visible church has to meet in order to serve its purpose (viz. the representation of the moral Kingdom of God on earth, as far as man can contemplate it), sensibility and imagination are explicitly excluded. The true church can only appeal to moral motives, and has to be 'cleansed of the nonsense of superstition and the madness of fantasmatism' (*Religion*, 143). As a consequence of this, Kant offers an overall moral interpretation of the Trinity, which illustrate his approach to delineate moral motives in religion as clearly as possible from all other ones. Trinity appears as the three specifically different ways, in which God wants to be served as morally qualified, viz. as supreme lawgiver, goodness, and justice. 'In order to designate this moral quality, the expression of different (not physically, but morally) personalities of one and the same being is not unsuitable. And this creed of faith at the same time expresses the whole of pure moral religion'

6. I. Kant, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*, 2. Auflage (1794), 230. In the following, I refer to this work in the main text as (*Religion*. . .).

(*Religion*, 214). Every other representation of the Trinity than a moral one is a reprehensible kind of anthropomorphism. 'Faith in it as an extension of theoretical cognition of the divine nature would only be the profession of a creed of ecclesiastical faith totally unintelligible to human beings or, if they think that they understand it, the profession of an anthropomorphic creed. And not the least would thereby be accomplished for moral improvement' (*Religion*, 215). Thus, it becomes clear that, as far as religion within the boundaries of mere reason is concerned, an anthropomorphic representation of the Trinity is completely out of question. Religious imagination inevitably introduces a sensuous element into religion, thereby deterring man from the virtuous conduct in life as the only way to become well-pleasing to God.

This interpretation of the faculty of imagination in the *Religion* demonstrates that the problem of religious illusion gets here a new dimension in comparison with the *Anthropology*. In the *Religion* the issue is not so much the 'intellectual' error to take one's imaginations for reality, but the moral consequences of religious illusion for humans. Whereas in the theoretical representation of God and his essence by the faculty of imagination, anthropomorphism (being the source of religious illusion as such) is hardly avoidable and is rather harmless (cf. anthropomorphism as unfortunate and childish), it 'is highly dangerous with respect to our practical relation to his [God's] will and to our morality. For, since *we are making a God for ourselves*, we create him in the way we believe that we can most easily win him over to our advantage' (*Religion*, 257). In the practically-moral kind of anthropomorphism, man creates with the help of his imagination a God, which he serves in other ways than by a virtuous conduct in life. In this context one can e.g. think of the festivities and public games in honor of a God in ancient Greece and Rome. But one can also refer to the products of religious art in Christian faith. In any case, all these manifestations of religious imagination deter man from the true, moral religion: '*Apart from a good conduct in life, anything which the human being supposes that he can do to become well-pleasing to God is mere religious delusion and counterfeit service of God*' (*Religion*, 260–1).

In this context, Kant specifically analyzes the dangers of the appeal to religious imagination for purely moral, reasonable faith. It is a form of religious delusion. We can speak of delusion, when someone has 'the habit of taking a mere representation (of the imagination) for the presence of the thing itself, and to value it as such' (*Religion*, 256, Note). As we have shown above, the products of religious imagination in this way lose their symbolic character, resulting in the substitution of the things themselves by images. But moreover, man *values* these images as the things themselves. This confronts us with the moral aspect of religious illusion: it creates wrong tracks to become well-pleased to God, whereas the only true path is a virtuous conduct in life. One of the ways to produce this illusory state of mind is *fantasmaticism*, i.e. a kind of religious imagination, which is not only intellectually, but also morally reprehensible. A *fantasmatic* person is convinced of the fact that there are other effects of God's grace besides the one that results from virtuous conduct. Hereby we can e.g. think of someone who imagines hearing the voice of God in his mind. This person considers these (imaginary)

sounds as an unmistakable sign that he is in the grace of God, although they have nothing to do with any kind of virtuous behavior. In this situation, the productive imagination produces a representation, which only corresponds to his hopes and expectations, but not to any sensory experience. For man is unable to know a supersensible object by experience, in this case to hear the voice of God. We are dealing here with a ‘self-deception detrimental to religion’ (*Religion*, 267). The morally problematic aspect of this self-deception lies in the fact that this person tries to realize his justification for God by the pursuit of a supposedly intimate contact with him by means of imaginary representations. In this situation, the purpose and the means of religion are being confused. The purpose of true religion is to become well-pleased to God by a virtuous conduct in life. Faith in the effect of God’s grace, as a supplement of the imperfection of our striving for virtue, can be helpful to this end. But it is essential that this effect results from the nature of virtue, and this is precisely not so in the case of the fantasmatic hearing of God’s voice or having divine visions and intuitions. Moreover, these means always have to be subordinate to their proper end, the virtuous conduct in life. However, fantasmatism contents itself with the supposed possession of the means, and acts as if this counts as the possession of the purpose. To put it more concretely: someone, who has visions or supposes to hear God’s voice, thinks that this is sufficient to justify him in the eyes of God, thereby sparing himself the effort of a virtuous conduct in life. Tartly Kant remarks ‘fantasmatic religious delusion is the moral death of the reason, without which there can be no religion’ (*Religion*, 268).

Which systematic conclusions can we draw from the first section of my historical-philosophical case study? In the first place, I think that it is crucial for religion to take Kant’s warning against a naive trust in imagination to heart. ‘We play with the imagination frequently and gladly, but (as fantasy) the imagination just as often plays with us, sometimes very *inconveniently*’ (*Anthropologie*, 80). As far as religion is concerned, this inconvenience consists of two kinds of illusion, an intellectual and a moral one. Kant’s analysis has also shown why this illusion threatens religion much more than other fields of human existence and culture. In religion, there is no solid empirical base available to keep our expectations and hopes under control; and this is especially the case for the products of the imagination, which result from them. Therefore, we cannot test them out. Moreover, religion does not only concern the imaginative powers of man, but places his whole existence in the sign of God’s grace, including his moral and religious actions. With this, the moral illusion, to which the imagination as fantasmatism can give rise, comes to the fore. As an illustration of this important issue, I refer to the translation of the German word *Schwärmerei*, which in English does not only mean fantasmatism, but also fanaticism.⁷ Even without accepting Kant’s project of a purely moral religion, we know all too well to which terrible consequences religious fanaticism can lead. I particularly think of the people, who claim that God has directly given them the assignment to kill all atheists and impious, since they are only pigs, the Americans in the first place. When we interpret this from a philo-

7. Cf. footnote 5.

sophical perspective, it is clear that we are dealing here with the disastrous effects of religious imaginations, viz. inciting people without any rational mediation to actions that are morally unacceptable. The painful, but important lesson, which Kant teaches us, is to be extremely suspicious of this kind of religious immediacy. In sum, Kant makes us sadder and wiser with regard to the use of imagination in religion.

This leads us to our second systematic question, viz. the implications of a negative attitude towards imagination for the rationality of philosophy of religion. In order to avert the danger of religious illusion, Kant states that religion has to be confined within the boundaries of mere reason. This implies that reason is to be delineated as clearly as possible from religious imagination; they are opposed to one another as truth and delusion, truthful religion and superstition. Consequently, philosophy of religion has an essential critical function with regard to imagination. Let us quote Kant once again: 'Thus if it is disputed that reason deserves the right to speak *first* in matters concerning supersensible objects such as the existence of God and the future world, then a wide gate is opened to all fantasmaticism, superstition and even to atheism.'⁸ From the tradition of the Enlightenment, philosophy sets itself up as the critical judge, who tests the doctrines and imaginations of religion against the standard of pure, impartial reason. Thus, philosophy appears as the authority that can stem the tide of religious illusion. It does so in the first place by stressing the symbolic character of religious imagination. Man has to be aware of the fact that the products of his imagination are totally dissimilar to the supersensible content of religion. Secondly, philosophy unmasks man's conviction that he can approach God only by imaginations as illusory. Therefore, philosophy has the task to keep religion within the boundaries of mere reason. It has an antithetical relation to imagination. A synthesis of both faculties of the human mind in an 'imaginative reason' is out of question. But which are the effects of this position? Doesn't it involve that religion is cut off from the affective and imaginative dimensions of man? But what happens if religious imagination proves to have a truth of its own, which remains hidden for the judgment of reason? Can't we 'imagine' a truth, which transcends the boundaries of mere reason, and isn't religion an attempt to relate man to this divine truth? From a Kantian perspective, the answers to all these intriguing questions cannot be given. But nevertheless, they are of crucial importance to religion and the philosophical reflection on it. In the next section, I will show, by means of Hegel's discussion with Kant, that there are positive ways to integrate the faculty of imagination in religion, without this leading to intellectual and moral illusion.

3 Religion must appeal to the heart and fantasy of man

The attitude of enlightened understanding towards religious imagination, analyzed in the previous section, unmistakably has the merit of preserving mankind from the wrong tracks of illusion. But understanding can only operate this way at the cost of a high price. Besides the consequences for religion,

8. I. Kant, *Was heisst sich im Denken orientieren?* Akademie-Ausgabe Band VIII, 143.

which I indicated above, it also has major implications for philosophy. Is a philosophy, which cannot recognize the mere possibility that imagination is not only the source of illusion, but can also contain a truth, to which human reason has no access, still able to pass a fair judgement on religion? Is philosophical reason really the impartial judge, it thinks to be? A fundamental, critical question presents itself here: if philosophy, because of reason's inherent craving for power, cannot or will not offer resistance to its tendency of reducing that what transcends reason to a moment of a universal rationality, doesn't it become a form of violence? The fact that this fear is by no means imaginary becomes apparent from the work of Jacobi, a philosopher who was very influential on his contemporaries at the end of the 18th century. He is a critic of idealism, and consequently also criticizes Kant's philosophy. He characterizes it as an 'alone-philosophy', a purely immanent system of reason, or a 'philosophy of one piece'. It aims at producing its object itself, with as final goal to become totally self-sufficient ('alone'). In order to realize this, it has to dissolve all external objects of knowing, i.e. it has to dispose of all reality by reducing it to a moment of the knowing ego. Thus, 'the philosophizing of pure reason must be a chemical process, through which everything outside reason is transformed into nothing, so that only philosophy is left.'⁹ This remark casts a dark shadow over Kant's project to limit religion within the boundaries of mere reason: the shadow of nihilism. If one leaves philosophy to its own rational dynamic, it inevitably destroys what it wants to understand. It creates its own realm of thought by annihilating the real world. With regard to philosophy of religion, this implies that it reduces the mystery of faith to something that reason can grasp. This leads to the conclusion that reason is a kind of the violence, which threatens the essence of religion.¹⁰

Hegel grew up in an intellectual climate, in which these words struck a sympathetic note. They contributed to get going a process of self-reflection of the Enlightenment. Already from 1750/1770 on, the word 'Enlightenment' had been a popular concept. But the reflection on the conditions and limits of the Enlightenment only started some ten years later, viz. in the circles of the *Berliner Monatschrift*, founded in 1783. Philosophers like Moses Mendelssohn and Immanuel Kant contributed to this journal.¹¹ As a man of wide reading, Hegel could quite rapidly inquire into the state of the art of the Enlightenment. But moreover, he succeeded in grasping the dilemma of the Enlightenment, viz. the opposition between heart and reason, which was already present in the philosophies of Jacobi and Shaftesbury.¹² In his early writings, Hegel reflects upon the necessity of a revaluation of fantasy in comparison to understanding. He brings these diverging

9. F.H. Jacobi, *Werke III*, 20.

10. Cf. P. Jonkers, 'God or Nothing. Jacobi, Hegel and the Pantheism-controversy'.

11. In the December issue of the *Berliner Monatschrift* of 1783 the theologian J.F. Zöllner asked the question: 'What is *Enlightenment*? This question—which is almost as important as: What is truth? Has to be answered before one starts to enlighten! And I have nowhere found an answer to it yet.' In the volume of 1784, Mendelssohn, with his article *Über die Frage: was heisst aufklären?* and Kant, with his well-known essay *Was ist Aufklärung?* gave an answer to the provocative question of Zöllner.

12. Chr. Jamme, 'Ein ungelehrtes Buch'. *Die philosophische Gemeinschaft zwischen Hölderlin und Hegel in Frankfurt 1797–1800*, (Hegel-Studien, Beiheft 23) Bonn, 1983, 52.

tendencies together in a project of his own, characterized by a strong religious and political interest. However, in this initial period of his thinking he is not yet working at the development of a post-Kantian system of reason. He rather sets himself a practical objective, viz. to generalize the program of Enlightenment, i.e. to help it find acceptance in the mass of the people. By doing so, he wants to realize the ideal of his youth, viz. collaborating to the coming of the Kingdom of God. In a letter to Schelling from 1795 he writes: 'May the Kingdom of God come, and may our hands not rest idle in our lap.'¹³

Hegel's appreciation of fantasy should not be understood as if he abandoned the ideals of the Enlightenment, and switched over to the party of the counter-Enlightenment. On the contrary, his criticism of the abstract character of enlightened reason, which he holds responsible for the oppositions and disintegration of modern society, results in an effort to unify understanding with heart and fantasy. From a more general perspective too, the stress on the emotional aspects of thinking was not so much directed against the Enlightenment as such, but has to be understood as an attempt to reveal, with the help of reason, those domains of the human mind, which were still undiscovered. So, the revaluation of fantasy as an organ of knowing should be interpreted as a consequence of the crisis of the end of the Enlightenment, but it nevertheless remains a result of enlightened thinking.¹⁴ Hegel's diagnosis of his time is that the original ideal of a free religion has actually degenerated into a dogmatic and unfree religion. This urges him to think about founding a new religion, which does as much justice to the enlightened concept of a free subjectivity, as to the (classical) ideal of a unity of God, the cosmos, and the human world.¹⁵ Because of all these reasons, it is worthwhile to examine in this section Hegel's (mostly implicit) criticism of Kant's project of a reasonable religion and his plea for a revaluation of heart and fantasy in religion. This analysis will supply us with new elements to answer the question of the relevance of imagination for religion and its implications for the rationality of philosophy of religion.

In this intellectual climate Hegel, already during his student years, came into touch with Kant's critical philosophy, both directly by reading his works and indirectly through the courses of his professors at the *Tübinger Stift*. He is especially interested in Kant's practical philosophy and its consequences for philosophy of religion. He wonders whether religion can get a solid foundation on the basis of the doctrine of the postulates in the *Critique of practical reason*. From this perspective, he also studies Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, shortly after its publication in 1793.¹⁶ As is well-known, Kant situates the

13. J. Hofmeister (Hrsg.), *Briefe von und an Hegel, Band I*, Hamburg, Meiner 1969, 18.

14. Chr. Jamme, 'Ein ungelehrtes Buch', 30–2.

15. M. Bondeli, 'Vom Kantianismus zur Kant-Kritik. Der junge Hegel in Bern und Frankfurt,' in: M. Bondeli & H. Linneweber-Lammerskitten (Hrsg.), *Hegels Denkentwicklung in der Berner und Frankfurter Zeit*, Fink Verlag, 1999, 32.

16. Hegel's familiarity with Kant's *Religion* becomes apparent from the text of a sermon of June 16, 1793, and from the so-called *Tübingen Essay* (which is much more important for this paper) (cf. GW 1. 99). Cf. also M. Bondeli, *Der Kantianismus des jungen Hegel. Die Kant-Aneignung und Kant-Überwindung Hegels auf seinem Weg zum philosophischen System*, Hamburg, Meiner, 1997, 13.

foundation of moral law in the autonomy of practical reason. ‘The autonomy of the will is the only principle of all moral laws.’¹⁷ Accordingly, man as a moral being is only subjected to a legislation that is founded in himself as a moral and reasonable being, but which is nevertheless also universal, as the first formulation of the categorical imperative shows. As a consequence of this, any appeal to the will of God and his commandments as the foundation of morality is out of question. The transition from ethics to religion only becomes necessary in relation to the problem of the supreme good as the ultimate end of the moral world. By connecting virtue (morality) and earthly bliss (sensibility), Kant wants to bridge the gap between nature and morality. If the supreme good would not be possible, moral law would be of no value whatever. Thus, the imperative to realize the supreme good is nothing else than the imperative to fulfill one’s duty. The practical necessity of the supreme good leads to postulating immortality, freedom, and the existence of God. Only in this way it is possible to reconcile the desire for happiness of finite human beings (a constitutive element of the supreme good) and the demands of moral law. In this context, God appears as the guarantor of the unity of the two worlds, in which man lives, the sensuous and the moral one. So, religion emanates from morality and is therefore part of moral philosophy. The postulates establish the content of the purely reasonable religion. The only moral motives that Kant allows in his practical reason, are respect for the moral law and sense of moral duty. He explicitly excludes all sensuous feelings in his foundation of morality and his moral theory of religion (see above).

In his thinking, Hegel departs from the results of Kant’s ethics and philosophy of religion. During his student years in Tübingen (from 1789 till the fall of 1793) and also later, when he is successively private tutor in Bern (from the fall of 1793 till the end of 1796) and Frankfurt (from 1797 till 1800), he is not interested in a theoretical foundation of moral philosophy as such, because he is convinced that Kant had already accomplished this. On the contrary, he wants to examine how the moral principles of Kant can be used in practice and how they can thus be realized in religion. In a letter to Schelling of April 1795 he writes: ‘I expect that the Kantian system and its highest completion will provoke a revolution in Germany. It will depart from principles that are generally available, and (when adapted in general) only need to be applied to all the knowing we have so far.’¹⁸ So, Kant’s practical philosophy serves as an adequate theoretical framework for Hegel’s thinking during this period. But his primordial interest is the *application* of morality, i.e. of the Kantian principle of freedom, to religion. This is only possible through the establishment of a new religion, which has the character of a moral religion of the people. The so-called *Tübingen Essay*, probably written during the period of the end of his student years (1793) and the first months of his stay in Bern (1794), offers an excellent illustration of his attitude towards Kant’s philosophy. In this paper I will limit myself mainly to a discussion of this text. I do so because the issue of imagination (or in Hegel’s own words: fantasy) in religion plays an important role in this text. Moreover, we can see here how he struggles

17. I. Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, A 58.

18. *Briefe von und an Hegel*, Band I, 23–4.

with the question of the consequences of the introduction of imagination into religion: does it imply that religion has to give up its rational character completely, or is there a way to unite imagination and reason?

The first aspect of Hegel's project to apply Kant's moral philosophy to religion is his attitude towards actual Christian religion.¹⁹ It is striking that he defends a much more critical position than Kant. As we have seen above, Kant vehemently criticized the confusion of pure rational religion with imagination and other sensuous elements, since he was convinced that it would lead to all kinds of superstition. But more in general, he thought that actual Christianity contains the principles of pure moral religion and can be purified in view of the latter. Hegel, from his side, takes a much more negative attitude with regard to Christian religion, which he accuses of having destroyed the own religious fantasy of the people. A striking example of this is a text from 1796: 'Christianity has emptied the Walhalla, cut down the holy woods, and eradicated this fantasy of the people as a disgraceful superstition, as a devilish poison. In return for it, it gave us the fantasy of a people, whose climate, legislation, culture, and interests are strange to us, and with whose history we do not have any connection. In the imagination of our people lives a David, a Salomon, but the heroes of our native country slumber in the history books of the scholars' (GW 1.359).

This leads us to the second aspect of Hegel's application of Kant's philosophy of religion, the relation between intelligible moral law and the sensuous nature of man, and as a consequence of this, the question of the place and function of imagination or fantasy in religion. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant wondered 'how one can get the laws of pure practical reason accepted by the human heart, (...) i.e. how one can make objectively practical reason also subjectively practical.'²⁰ This effort to subjectivate the objective moral law consists in fact of nothing else than to look for those sensuous motives in man, which are suitable to serve as a means to support and promote the fulfillment of the moral law. However, these sensuous motives can never be more than a way that leads to morality; they can by no means be its principle. The motives that qualify to this purpose are selected on the basis of a hierarchical order, led by their intrinsically moral content. Concretely, Kant thinks of the sense of duty in following the moral law, and of the esteem of the law. In the *Religion*, he adds to this the purity of the heart, which is necessary in view of the revolution of man's moral disposition. This unmistakably implies a negative judgement of the major part of the sensuous motives of man. Its context is an anthropology, which takes a negative attitude towards sensuous nature. As a consequence of this, the fulfillment of moral law gets the appearance of a permanent struggle of reasonable will with corrupt sensuous nature.²¹ By asking how morality can be made fruitful to man, both as an intelligible and as a sensuous being, Hegel endorses Kant's ideas on this topic. But right from the start, he lays another stress. In the *Tübingen Essay*, he states that 'sensibility is the main element of all acting and striving of man' (GW 1. 84). Only from an abstract point of view it is possible to separate pure morality from

19. M. Bondeli, 'Vom Kantianismus zur Kant-Kritik,' 34.

20. I. Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, A 269.

21. M. Bondeli, 'Vom Kantianismus zur Kant-Kritik,' 37.

sensibility. But when one considers man and his life concretely, one has to take into account his sensibility, his dependence on external and internal nature. With this statement, Hegel does not turn himself into a protagonist of the moral sense philosophy. He agrees with Kant that morality has to be based on an intelligible principle. But in opposition to Kant, he departs from an optimistic view of human nature. This means that he thinks man capable of converting and sublimating his sensuous motives into moral principles. Moreover, he does not only think of the sensuous motives of the singular subject, but especially of the ethical climate of a whole community. Only a religion of the people is capable of uniting morality and bliss. This religion is instrumental to produce the moral disposition in a community.

The foregoing shows that Hegel approaches religion anthropologically; he departs from human being, starting to think about himself and his relation to God. Man is not satisfied anymore with acquired rituals, prayers and their hollow phrases, but he wants to engraft religion 'onto the natural needs of the human mind' (GW 1. 84). With this, he turns against Kant's depreciation of sensuous nature, in common with the authoritarian character of ecclesiastical doctrine and religious formulas, which only regard the external aspect of religion. But besides this, another issue plays a crucial role, viz. the union of sensibility and rational thinking. This leads us to the central question of this paper, viz. the relation between understanding and imagination (or fantasy) in religion and the idea of a kind of knowing that is capable of uniting them. Before starting the analysis of Hegel's complex answer, it is vital to keep in mind two things. In the first place, there are a lot of tensions and obscurities in Hegel's dealing with this problematic, as a consequence of which it is impossible to present an unambiguous interpretation of his position. On the one hand, he opposes the warm heart of religious man to cold understanding: 'The operations and the doubt [of understanding] can rather cool down the heart than warm it' (GW 1. 92). On the other hand, it is also clear for him that 'the doctrine [of the religion of the people] has to be founded on universal reason' (GW 1. 103). Secondly, it is striking that Hegel describes this new kind of knowing, which unites understanding and sensibility, only metaphorically, whereas the way in which 'the ideas of reason enliven the whole texture of his [viz. man's] perceptions' (GW 1. 85) remains conceptually vague.²² This becomes apparent from the following quotation: 'The [sensuous] nature of man is, as it were, full of the ideas of reason' (GW 1. 85). Another metaphor in this context is the one of the salt, which permeates a dish and flavors it, although one cannot point at a lump of salt in the dish. These images do make clear that reason is present in sensuous human nature in an undeveloped way, and furthermore that it is spread invisibly in the whole of sensuous appearances. Reason permeates everything, but cannot be demonstrated as a separate substance.

From this perspective, we can understand the issue of the importance of heart and fantasy for religion. 'The concept of religion implies that it is not a pure science of God, (...) not a purely historical or well-reasoned knowledge, but that it concerns the heart, that it affects our feelings and the destination of

22. Vgl. M. Bondeli, *Hegel in Bern*, (Hegel-Studien, Beiheft 33), Bonn, Bouvier, 1990, 96ff.

our will' (GW 1. 85). With this, Hegel states that there is an opposition between rational thinking or science on the one hand and man's sensibility or feelings on the other. Furthermore, he stresses the importance of heart and fantasy, thus implicitly criticizing Kant's project of a religion within the boundaries of mere reason. More specifically, he agrees with his view on the moral core of religion, viz. that our duties and laws 'are represented for us as laws of God' (GW 1. 85). But this is not sufficient to get religion accepted by the people. In order to reach this, our hearts have to be filled with admiration and feelings of humility and gratitude. Only by appealing to these sublime feelings of man, religion is capable 'to stem the tide of the power of sensuous passions' (GW 1. 85). This remark asks for interpretation, since it seems to nuance considerably the opposition between understanding and sensibility, and replace it by an opposition between the higher and the lower feelings of the heart. Apparently, Hegel is not so much concerned about the elevation of fantasy above understanding, which would turn him into an advocate of an irrational religion of subjective feeling and a protagonist of the counter-enlightenment. His attitude is much more complex. Heart and fantasy are not opposed as something irrational to the rationality of reason, but are in their unification with reason able to determine the moral destination of the will. From this perspective, a duality remains, but it concerns a duality between the lower sensuous passions and the higher feelings of man, which can be harmoniously united with his intelligible nature. This qualification of his point of view seemingly brings Hegel closer to Kant's position. However, the crucial difference between them is that for Hegel, heart and fantasy are not a means to, but an intrinsic part of moral religion.

However, Hegel does not content himself with the observation of the unity of fantasy and reason in religion, but also wonders how it can be realized. This question is in accordance with his pragmatic purpose, viz. to get religion accepted by the people. But Hegel's approach also shows that he does neither reflect theoretically upon the way in which reason and fantasy can be united, nor upon the nature of this 'imaginative knowing', which should result from this unification. He only hints at the capacity of religion to realize this unity practically in a people. 'My aim is not to examine which religious doctrines are of most importance to the heart, which ones can offer the best comfort and elevation of the soul, or what the nature of the religious doctrines should be in order to make a people better and happier. On the contrary, I want to work out which institutions are necessary to involve the doctrines and strength of religion into the texture of human feelings; I want to show how to connect them with our motives to act, and how they become lively and effective in human beings.' If this purpose is realized, 'then religion spreads itself over all branches of human propensities' (GW 1. 90).

The unity of understanding and heart is also important for the distinction between objective and subjective religion. Objective religion 'is *fides quae creditur*; understanding and memory are the powers, which are active in it, they examine the contents of knowledge, think them through, preserve and believe them' (GW 1. 87). It is a pure religion of understanding or a theology, which can be composed by the mind, arranged in a system, and presented in reference books. Subjective

religion, on the other hand, only expresses itself in feelings and actions; it 'is lively, active in the inner essence of man and externalizing itself' (GW 1. 88). This does not imply that it is totally opposed to any objective knowledge. The whole mass of religious knowledge 'is interwoven in subjective religion, but this mass is only a small and rather ineffective part of it' (GW 1. 88). Concretely, this interweaving implies that objective knowledge adopts a different shape in every individual. The ways, in which these shapes are formed, depend on the religious and moral moods of the individuals, and the latter are formed through education and civilization.

This analysis of the *Tübingen Essay* shows that Hegel's answer to the question of the importance of imagination to religion clearly diverges from Kant's. With his reflection upon the conditions for the effectiveness of religion, he has made clear that heart and fantasy are necessary for religion in order to influence the whole of man. Otherwise, religion degenerates into a system of objective theological knowledge and formal moral rules, from which any vitality has vanished. But this makes Kant's critical question about the inconvenient game, which the imagination (as fantasy) plays with man, only more pertinent. How can subjective religion, for which imagination is so vital, preserve itself from illusion? In order to understand Hegel's answer, it is crucial to keep in mind that the distinction between religious truth and delusion is as vital for him as for Kant. Just like Kant, he also refuses any kind of religious obscurantism, to which an irrational use of imagination could give rise. This becomes apparent from his aversion to supernaturalism, which was taught by some of his professors at the *Tübinger Stift*.²³ With regard to this issue, he is, just like Kant, a child of the Enlightenment. But contrary to Kant, Hegel is convinced that the domain of truth does not coincide with reasoning understanding. Therefore, in his view, the confinement of religion within the boundaries of mere reason does not only put an end to religious illusion, but also cuts man off from the truth that is present in religious imagination. Let us examine his discussion of this issue.

First of all, Hegel does acknowledge that it really is possible for the religion of a people to become affected by illusion. The religious errors, which are present in the mind of a people, 'are founded on sensibility, more specifically on the blind anticipation that an effect will follow, which is not at all connected with the cause that is supposed to produce this effect' (GW 1. 95). Faith in miracles and divine visions are the best-known examples of this. But religious fantasy does not necessarily lead to errors and illusions, nor does the appeal to understanding offer a watertight guarantee for the truth of religion. In order to make this point clear, Hegel does not speak of errors, left alone of illusions, but of prejudices. 'There are two kinds of prejudices: a) real errors b) real truths; the latter, however, should not be recognized, and known by reason as is the case with [rational] truths, but are accepted on the basis of fidelity and faith' (GW 1. 95). Therefore, preserving a people from religious prejudices comes down to cultivating its understanding in such a way, that it on the one hand rids itself of the persuasiveness and the power of errors, and on the other convinces itself by means of a well-founded knowing of real religious truths. However, the use and interpretation of the term 'prejudice'

23. Chr. Jamme, *'Ein ungelehrtes Buch'*, 34.

show that the matter is not so simple. For actually, a prejudice can turn out to be an error as well as a truth. But for man as a finite being, it is impossible to make a clear-cut distinction between these two by means of a well-founded knowledge. For 'which mortal wants to decide just like that what is truth?' (GW 1. 95).

With this statement, Hegel does certainly not want to take a skeptical position concerning the question of truth in religion. On the contrary, there really are universally valid principles, which are not only clear to common sense, but are also fundamental for any religion. But in spite of this, there are only a few of these principles, and furthermore people cannot easily recognize them in a lively way. In other words, it is difficult to affect their hearts with these truths in such a way, that religion can become effective. And moreover, it is impossible for religion to consist only of universal truths. There are always additions mixed in it, which have to be accepted purely on the basis of fidelity or faith. Hegel concludes 'that a religion of the people (. . .) impossibly can be founded on reason alone' (GW 1. 96), but always depends on faith in a tradition too. With this barely concealed criticism of Kant's project, he wants to show that there is a truth, which lies beyond the reasoning understanding. Religion contains truths, which cannot be known by understanding, but can only be accepted by a community of faith, which is willing to listen to the voices of heart and fantasy. This implies that fantasy, besides its pragmatic use to get religion accepted by man, also has a vital importance for religious man: it can show him truths that cannot be known by strict reason.²⁴ Furthermore, Hegel states here, diverging from his mature view of the relation between representation and concept, that it is impossible to give a rational foundation of these truths. Real errors and real truths occur in all kinds of mixes in the religion of a people. Thus, in opposition to Kant, reason cannot operate as a judge, who summons actually existing, revealed religion. It cannot clearly and impartially judge about truth and illusion in religion. For mortal man with his finite reason is not capable to decide exactly what is truth, especially not if this truth belongs to the domain of the immortal and supersensible, in sum the divine.

This result leads to the second question of this paper, viz. the implications of introducing imagination into religion for the rationality of philosophy of religion. In the foregoing, I already noticed that Hegel's answer to this question is all but clear. The reason for this is that his primary interest in the texts, discussed above, is not a philosophical, but a practical one, viz. to get religion accepted by the people. Therefore, he is hardly concerned with a conceptual clarification of the relation between imagination and reason, and contents himself with metaphorical indications. Nevertheless, it is both for religion and for philosophical reflection of crucial importance to examine the possibility of a unification of fantasy and understanding, of an 'imagining reason'. In the foregoing, I have shown that Hegel uses the concept fantasy in order to criticize Kant's aim to judge religion according to the standards of 'cold understanding' (GW 1. 92). 'The enlightenment of understanding makes man smarter, but not better' (GW 1. 94). Understanding

24. Bondeli only considers the pragmatic function of fantasy for the religion of the people, and insufficiently considers fantasy as an important approach to the truth of religion. Cf. M. Bondeli, *Hegel in Bern*, 98.

is compared with ‘a servant, who attentively follows the moods of his master—he knows to rake out a justification for each passion, for each enterprise. He is pre-eminently a servant of self-love, always very shrewd to paint mistakes, already committed or still to be committed, in beautiful colors’ (GW 1. 94). Specifically with regard to religion, this negative attitude towards understanding comes down to the conviction that it appears to be blind to the sacred, such as man can call it to mind by means of his imagination and feeling. In other words, understanding is a reducing, demythologizing kind of knowledge, which desecrates the sacred. It reduces the holy woods to mere timber and the temple to any pile of stones. In sum, ‘by the progress of the understanding many feelings get lost, and the associations of the imagination become weaker’ (GW 1. 124).²⁵

However, it would be incorrect to conclude from the foregoing that Hegel would reject the rational aspect of religion completely, and consider the latter merely as a matter of emotion and imagination. For the concepts fantasy and heart are being used here in another way as well, viz. as an indication of a knowing which unifies sensibility and understanding. Thus, the question presents itself ‘how deep reason may involve itself in religion, in such a way that the latter remains religion’ (GW 1. 96). At first, the answer to this question is primarily a negative one. Thinking reflectively about the source of religious feelings and rituals, about their historical origin and appropriateness deprives them of their ‘aura of sacredness’. Consequently, religious man experiences only little support from such a way of thinking. Therefore, he appeals to wisdom, which is incommensurable with science and the reasoning of enlightened understanding. ‘Wisdom is an elevation of the soul by experience, connected with thinking, above the dependence on opinions and the impressions of sensibility. If it is practical wisdom (. . .), it necessarily has to be accompanied by a quiet warmth, a low heat’ (GW 1. 97). The natural warmth of wisdom is here radically opposed to the mechanism of cold understanding. Doesn’t Hegel with this statement still become an advocate of the counter-enlightenment? A tension arises between the ideal of an unbroken naturalness, which comes close to the idea of a all-embracing union, and the realistic option of Enlightenment, characterized by fundamental oppositions. As a child of the Enlightenment Hegel knows all too well that one cannot restore the natural unity, which is destroyed by reflection, simply by appealing to an immediate naturalness. What has broken up the original unity of reflection and heart can only be unified again by means of a higher kind of philosophical thinking. With this, Hegel goes beyond the ideas of early romanticism.²⁶ But in this period of his intellectual development, he is unable to articulate this unity conceptually and to analyze the way in which it can be known.

25. It is striking that Hegel uses in this quotation the term ‘reason’ (and not understanding). This shows the lack of consistency of his terminology in this matter. It also shows how much he is still looking for an appropriate approach to think religion. When we look at other fragments from this period, and especially when we examine the texts written during the first years of his stay in Jena, it becomes apparent that he specifically turns against understanding and not against human reason as such. As an illustration of this, one can think of the reproach, made in *Glauben und Wissen*, that understanding ‘knows the intuited as a thing, the holy wood as mere timber’ (GW 4. 317).

26. M. Bondeli, *Hegel in Bern*, 101.

Let me, as a conclusion of this section on Hegel's early work, shortly examine the way in which he solves the problem of the relation between imagination and understanding in his later work. For as we interpret this problematic from the perspective of his first really philosophical essay, the so-called *Difference Essay* of 1801, his ideas on this issue become much clearer. By that time, he has recognized that his project, viz. to cooperate to the coming of the Kingdom of God, can only be realized in a scientific, philosophical way. In a letter to Schelling of November 2, 1800, written at the moment that he had already taken the decision to devote his life entirely to the study of philosophy, he clarifies the reasons for this change of perspective. 'In my scientific education, which began from subordinate needs of man, I had to be driven forth to science, and at the same time, the ideal of my youth had to change into a reflexive form, in a system. While I am still struggling with these questions, I wonder how I can return to intervening in the lives of men.'²⁷ This quotation shows that he is convinced that a more fundamental philosophical criticism of his time is needed to realize his ideal.²⁸ In the programmatic introduction to the *Difference Essay*, he states that modern civilization is characterized by a number of fundamental oppositions, like the ones between faith and understanding, reason and sensibility, intelligence and nature (GW 4. 13). The source of them is the power of understanding to determine concepts as clearly as possible by opposing one determination to another. By doing so, understanding drifts further and further apart from the absolute or, phrased in religious terms, from God. It poses a conceptual construction between man and the absolute, and connects to it everything that is sacred to man. This criticism of the philosophy of understanding in the *Difference Essay* is an echo of his critical attitude towards objective religion and the power of understanding in the *Tübingen Essay*. Its essence is that understanding, and consequently also a religion within the boundaries of understanding, separates man from God.

However, the way in which Hegel wants to overcome understanding in this text fundamentally differs from his ideas of the previous period. He is convinced that a religion, appealing to the imagination and the heart of man is not capable of breaking the power of finite knowing. Rather, understanding has to be given a taste of its own medicine. 'When the power of unification disappears from the lives of men and the oppositions have lost their lively relationship and interaction and become independent, then the need of philosophy arises' (GW 4. 14). This philosophy should not negate understanding, but has to incorporate it, thus establishing a reasonable or speculative knowing of the absolute. Reason does not turn against the oppositions of understanding as such, but only against making them something absolute. However, the issue is how one should conceive this speculative knowledge of the absolute. In this text, Hegel does not speak of the heart or imagination at all as a means for philosophy to think the absolute in a non-reflective way. For these concepts refer too much to a sphere that lies outside philosophical thinking, thus asking again for the problems with which he struggled in the *Tübingen Essay* and in other texts from this period. In the *Difference*

27. *Briefe von und an Hegel: Band I*, 59–60.

28. For an examination of the reasons of this change of attitude, cf. P. Jonkers, *Can Philosophy Understand Religion?*

Essay, he conceives ‘imaginative thinking’, being a union of understanding and imagination, as a speculative union of reflection and intellectual or transcendental intuition. In order to be capable to stem the tide of making the oppositions absolute, reason has to appeal to an intellectual intuition, which keeps reflection orientated to the absolute. ‘Besides this negative side [viz. the oppositions of understanding], [philosophical] knowing has a positive one, viz. intuition. Pure knowing, i.e. knowing without intuition, destroys the oppositions in a contradiction; intuition without this synthesis of opposites is empirical, given, unconscious. Transcendental knowing unites both, reflection and intuition; it is concept and being at the same time’ (GW 4. 27). This speculative knowing is a philosophical elaboration of what Hegel only metaphorically and from a practical perspective described in the *Tübingen Essay* as a unification of reason and fantasy or an imaginative knowing.

4 Conclusion

Let us draw a few systematic conclusions from this historic-philosophical case study. Kant has shown that religious imagination can be the origin of illusion. How can we avoid that it plays an inconvenient game with us, consisting of taking our desires and expectations for reality? A philosophical criticism is necessary to purify the products of religious imagination. And similarly, religiously motivated actions may never back out of the necessity of rational mediation. All revelations of God’s will through holy books, visions, voices from heaven and other kinds of religious imagination, should always be examined and interpreted critically by human reason. In sum, Kant’s idea of the court of reason, which summons religious imagination and investigates its possible effects on man, should warn us against a naive enthusiasm.

But on the other hand, by going all the way with Kant’s project to confine religion within the boundaries of mere reason, philosophy runs the risk of nihilism. Paradoxically, nihilism does not only come up when rationality is given up in favor of the will to power, but is also deeply embedded in reason itself, more specifically when it gives way to its tendency to become self-sufficient. Because of its urge to scrutinize everything as thoroughly as possible, reason on the one hand is lured to rationalize its object, thus reducing it to a moment of reason itself, and on the other to repudiate and negate all that refuses rational integration. Concerning religion, this question comes down to the position that understanding religion inevitably ends in suppressing it. Everyone, who is a bit familiar with the development of philosophy of religion in modernity, knows that this danger is all but imaginary. Therefore, it is vital for philosophy itself to appreciate imagination as a kind of consciousness that transcends rational thinking as such. This does not imply that reason is not capable at all of thinking the products of imagination. In order to do so, philosophy needs a broader kind of rationality than the one of finite understanding, as Hegel has pointed out. But, as is common knowledge, his project ends in a radical suppression of religion by philosophy. Therefore, I consider it to be a task for contemporary philosophy of religion to examine new forms of imaginative thinking.